World Food Day [16th October 2008]
Q&A with Caroline Pougin de La Maisonneuve.
European Commission Humanitarian Aid department.
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Up to 17 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in the Horn of Africa according to figures released by the United Nations. Many of those people are in urgent need of food as the region braces itself for another period of sustained drought.

World Food Day, which seeks to draw attention to the international effort needed to defeat hunger is being marked on October 16th. The European Commission Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) is one of the world’s largest donors of food assistance. Nairobi-based Caroline Pougin de La Maisonneuve is an ECHO food assistance specialist covering the hunger crisis in the Horn of Africa.

Question: How serious is the food situation in the Horn of Africa?
Caroline Pougin de La Maisonneuve: The situation across a lot of the region is extremely serious at the moment and could worsen if the seasonal rains fail in October and November. It is very difficult to put a figure on how many people need humanitarian assistance, which includes food aid. The UN says it is around 17 million, double the level of earlier in the year. However, getting accurate figures can be very difficult as food aid can provoke a wide spectrum of reactions. Some governments want to play down the figures to protect their country’s international image; others might inflate the figures to ensure higher levels of aid.

Q: Is the scale of the food aid problem worse than in previous years.
CPM: There are certainly more people going hungry than in previous years in places like Karamoja in Uganda, central Somalia, the Oromia and SNNPR regions of southern Ethiopia as well as Djibouti and northern Kenya. The key fact is that these areas are now facing severe drought situations every 3-5 years whereas in the past it was once every 8-10 years. The reasons for this are complicated. There have been climatic changes, for example less rain and less reliable weather patterns, desertification, but this is only part of the story. An increase in population means that the land can no longer provide enough food to feed all the people that live on it. Conflict also means that many pastoralists, who predominate in these areas, can no longer access the best pastures, so many animals are dieing adding to the shortage of food.

Q: Is food aid reaching the people in need?
CPM: People working for humanitarian aid organisations are saying that it has never been so difficult to find food to buy to feed people in drought affected areas. Although prices are higher than ever before, money has been made available by organisations like ECHO, but it is difficult to buy the cereals that are required. There are many reasons for this including less worldwide production and increasing demand for food because of growing populations. At a local level less food is being grown in the drought areas, partly due to the weather but also because farmers have less money to spend on fertilizers so are planting less and so have got into a vicious circle of declining production. Bizarrely, in Oromia and SNNPR in southern Ethiopia, which I
visited in August, the land was lush and green, and maize was growing but not yet ready for harvest. There had been three failed harvests due to a lack of rain, so people there are still facing hunger and require food aid.

Q: Is there always going to be a need for food aid in the Horn of Africa?
CPM: In the short term food aid is clearly required. The European Commission Humanitarian Aid department has committed 134.5 million euros (US$182.6m) in aid so far in 2008 with another 20 million euros (US$27m) expected before the end of the year. A large proportion of this money has been spent on feeding people at times when there is simply no food available. However, we do differentiate between food aid, which is the basic provision of food to hunger affected people and food assistance, which includes a range of different options including food aid. Food assistance focuses on giving people the skills and the tools to respond to drought situations by themselves.

In Uganda’s Karamoja region, ECHO is supporting pastoralists in their efforts to conserve water which will keep their cattle alive through the drought thus providing milk and meat. In northern Kenya, farmers with access to water are being encouraged to grow fodder crops for animals and in southern Ethiopia farmers are being given cash vouchers which they can exchange for seeds and tools to restart agricultural activities.

What ECHO is trying to avoid is that communities become dependent on food aid and no longer have the will or the means to grow their own food and live sustainably. Food assistance strategies are giving those communities hope that one day they may be able to return to self-sufficiency.